

# A Semantic Analysis of Modality in the Lyrics of Taylor Swift's Songs

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## Abstract

Modality is a key semantic category that operates at the sentence level. The purpose of this research is to identify the types of modality and semantic meaning of modality in Taylor Swift's songs lyrics. The data are all lyrics from five selected songs on Taylor Swift's Folklore album: August, Cardigan, Mad Woman, Peace and Seven. The method for the research was qualitative content analysis. The results showed 31 modalities, among which were the epistemic modality; necessity (1), and probability (6). Deontic modality; obligation (2). Dynamic modality; Ability (6) and volition (16). Additionally, volition is the semantic meaning of modality that this research indicated to be most dominant. In dynamic modality, volition is the desire to act consciously or intentionally, which requires the individual's choice and effort. Students and individuals who have a solid understanding of modality are better able to communicate their ideas clearly and modify their communication style in accordance with the situation.

**Keywords:** Semantic, Modality, and Taylor Swift's Songs.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Humans communicate with one another through an elaborate system called language. Language has a crucial part in human life since it enables communication, knowledge acquisition, the development of social bonds, and the transmission of ideas. According to Ababa (2016), language enables people to fulfill activities (present a story, provide information, complain, or ask for help). Language serves as a tool for communication as well as a constant reflection of human identity, culture, and knowledge. Additionally, in linguistics disciplines, language is the primary subject of study. According to Akmajian et al (2010), linguistics involves the scientific examination of naturally occurring human language. Through the study of linguistics, we may comprehend how language structure impacts how we grasp the meanings that language is intended to express.

One branch of linguistics is semantics. Siminto (2013) defined semantics as the study of the association between linguistic signs and the concepts they represent, sometimes known as the science of meaning or word meaning. Sunubi (2016) stated that semantics is a subfield of linguistics that focuses on the study of meaning. In order to understand what meaning is as a component of language, how it is formed by language, and how speakers and listeners of

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language perceive, conceal, and negotiate meaning. Language often employs ambiguous or unclear words and sentences. Without an in-depth understanding of the meanings words and sentences indicate, communication will be ineffective, misunderstandings will occur, and troubles with daily life could happen. In order to reduce communication errors of judgment, semantics helps to make language more understandable and how meaning is employed in communication.

In addition to semantics, modality is a component of semantics along with provides a crucial communication tool that aids in message clarification, message expression, and better comprehension between speakers and listeners or readers. Saeed (2003) claimed that modality is a key semantic category that operates at the sentence level. A tool for expressing different levels of commitment towards or belief in a concept. Portner (2009) defined modality as a grammatical concept that enables us to express statements related to events that may not necessarily be factual. Palmer (2001) categorizes modality into three types: epistemic modality, which encompasses discussions on possibility, necessity, and probability. Deontic modality, which encompasses discussions on permission, obligation, and commissive. And lastly, dynamic modality, which encompasses discussions on ability and volition. Modality and semantics are interconnected concepts as modality has the potential to impact the significance of both individual words and entire sentences. It can be viewed as a semantic component that enhances language meaning under specific circumstances. In the realm of modality, semantics plays a crucial role in ascertaining the meaning of words employed within a sentence and in comprehending the modality employed.

Modality can be found in several ways, one of which is through songs. Songs are one example of literary works that can be divided into various genres that reflect individual tastes and preferences. A song is a musical composition intended for vocal performance, either alone or combined with musical instruments, and according to Hornby Jamalusi in Hasanah (2022), a song can be viewed as a work of art because it blends singing with musical instrument accompaniment. Dewi et al. (2020) also said that since time immemorial, songs have been part of human life around the world and continue to develop according to the times and culture. Song is a short piece of music with lyrics sung, and it can be concluded that a song is a poem that is performed through singing and accompanied by musical instruments, has an important

role in a person's daily life in different ways because everyone has different goals in listening to it, according to their respective personalities.

The use of modality plays a crucial part in crafting impactful and meaningful song lyrics. In Taufik and Cahyati (2022), lyrics can encompass both the creation of a song and literary works, such as poetry, that convey deeply personal sentiments. They can also convey our current emotions or use language in a specific arrangement that becomes coherent when formed into sentences. Through employing modality, singer and songwriters have the means to express emotions, communicate messages, and stories to their audience. Modality contributes to crafting a profound ambiance and enhancing the audience's ability to comprehend and immerse themselves in the music. Consequently, grasping the significance of modality in songs can assist songwriters and singers convey their messages more efficiently.

To support this research, researcher found preliminary research related to this research, by Nugraha Deden Novan Setiawan and Reyta Fitriani (2019) entitled "Modality in President Joko Widodo's Speeches on Independence Day 2018: Syntactic and Semantic". As a result, there are two different sorts of modality: epistemic modality and deontic modality which has a semantic meaning of social rules. Social rules may be governed by official authority or personal authority. Official authority stems from mutually agreed-upon norms or regulations to manage the livelihoods of the community in question, while personal authority is generated by distinctions in age, position, or social standing among individuals.

Modality phenomenon is often used in various forms of art and communication, such as songs, speeches, poetry, novels, and various other types of discourse. One interesting example in this context are the songs of famous singers and songwriters, such as Taylor Swift, which have achieved extraordinary popularity and remain in the spotlight today. In her works, there are various types of modalities that adorn the lyrics, providing an additional dimension in understanding the meaning and message conveyed. There are several problems related to this research, namely: (1) Numerous individuals still listen to songs without understanding the modality and semantic meaning of modality used in the lyrics. (2) The message intended by the songs is not the same as how the listener interprets the song's mode for communication. Based on these problems, the challenge in this research is to more objectively and systematically comprehend as well as classify the modality meaning. The researcher is

interested in conducting research entitled "A Semantic Analysis of Modality in the Lyrics of Taylor Swift's Songs".

## 2. METHOD

Humans communicate with one another through an elaborate system called language. Language has a crucial part in human life since it enables communication, knowledge acquisition, the development of social bonds, and the transmission of ideas. According to Ababa (2016), language enables people to fulfill activities (present a story, provide information, complain, or ask for help). Language serves as a tool for communication as well as a constant reflection of human identity, culture, and knowledge. Additionally, in linguistics disciplines, language is the primary subject of study. According to Akmajian et al (2010), linguistics involves the scientific examination of naturally occurring human language. Through the study of linguistics, we may comprehend how language structure impacts how we grasp the meanings that language is intended to express.

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which encompasses discussions on possibility, necessity, and probability. Deontic modality, which encompasses discussions on permission, obligation, and commissive. And lastly, dynamic modality, which encompasses discussions on ability and volition. Modality and semantics are interconnected concepts as modality has the potential to impact the significance of both individual words and entire sentences. It can be viewed as a semantic component that enhances language meaning under specific circumstances. In the realm of modality, semantics plays a crucial role in ascertaining the meaning of words employed within a sentence and in comprehending the modality employed.

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### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section covered the data that was collected for the research, while the second section showed the data that was analyzed to determine the results.

#### *The Types of Modality Found in the Lyrics of Taylor Swift's Songs*

Below is the table of results of the types of modality found in the lyrics of Taylor Swift's songs.

Types of Modality		Frequency
Epistemic Modality	Necessity	1
	Probability	6
Deontic Modality	Obligation	2

<b>Dynamic Modality</b>	Ability	6
	Volition	16
<b>Total</b>		<b>31</b>

**Table 3.1 The Result of Types of Modalities**

Based on the information provided in the table above, a total of 31 modalities were identified in five selected Taylor Swift's songs on Folklore album, namely; August, Cardigan, Mad Woman, Peace and Seven. Including epistemic modality; necessity (1) and probability (6). Deontic modality; obligation (2). And dynamic modality; ability (6) and volition (16).

### Epistemic Modality

From the research conducted, it was found that research result included in the category of epistemic modality are described in below as follows:

There is 1 necessity in Seven song.

#### Data 1

*Your dad is always mad and that must be why*

The lyrics can be located within Seven song employing the use of "must" modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

There are 6 probabilities in August, Cardigan, and Peace songs.

#### Data 1

*Cancel plans just in case you 'd call*

The lyrics can be located within August song employing the use of "would" modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring three times.

#### Data 2

*I know you 'd haunt all of my what-ifs*

The lyrics can be located within Cardigan song employing the use of "would" modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

### Data 3

*The smell of smoke would hang around this long*

The lyrics can be located within Cardigan song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

### Data 4

*I knew you 'd miss me once the thrill expired*

The lyrics can be located within Cardigan song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring one.

### Data 5

*And you 'd be standin' in my front porch light*

The lyrics can be located within Cardigan song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

### Data 6

*Would it be enough if I could never give you peace*

The lyrics can be located within Peace song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring four times.

### Deontic Modality

From the research conducted, it was found that research result included in the category of deontic modality are described in below as follows:

There are 2 obligations in Mad Woman and Seven songs.

### Data 1

*She should be mad, should be scathing like me, but*

The lyrics can be located within Mad Woman song employing the use of “should” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

### Data 2



*And I think you should come live with me*

The lyrics can be located within Seven song employing the use of “should” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

### Dynamic Modality

From the research conducted, it was found that research result included in the category of dynamic modality are described in below as follows:

There are 6 abilities in August, Peace, and Seven songs.

#### Data 1

*But I can see us lost in the memory*

The lyrics can be located within August song employing the use of “can” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring three times.

#### Data 2

*And I can see us twisted in bedsheets*

The lyrics can be located within August song employing the use of “can” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring three times.

#### Data 3

*Wishin’ I could write my name on it*

The lyrics can be located within August song employing the use of “could” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

#### Data 4

*No, I could never give you peace*

The lyrics can be located within Peace song employing the use of “could” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

#### Data 5

*And though I can’t recall your face*

The lyrics can be located within Seven song employing the use of “can” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring twice.

**Data 6**

*And we can be pirates*

The lyrics can be located within Seven song employing the use of “can” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

There are 16 volitions in August, Cardigan, Mad Woman, Peace, and Seven songs.

**Data 1**

*Will you call when you're back at school*

The lyrics can be located within August song employing the use of “will” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 2**

*But I know you'd linger like a tatto kiss*

The lyrics can be located within Cardigan song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 3**

*I knew I'd curse you for the longest time*

The lyrics can be located within Cardigan song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 4**

*And I knew you'd come back to me*

The lyrics can be located within Cardigan song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring four times.

**Data 5**

*What did you think I'd say to that?*

The lyrics can be located within Mad Woman song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 6**

*They strike to kill and you know I will*

The lyrics can be located within Mad Woman song employing the use of “will” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring twice.

**Data 7**

*And you ’ll poke that bear ‘til her claws come out*

The lyrics can be located within Mad Woman song employing the use of “will” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring twice.

**Data 8**

*But I’m fire, and I ’ll keep your brittle heart warm*

The lyrics can be located within Peace song employing the use of “will” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring twice.

**Data 9**

*But I would die for you in secret*

The lyrics can be located within Peace song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring twice.

**Data 10**

*And you know that I ’d swing with you for the fences*

The lyrics can be located within Peace song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 11**

*I ’d give you my sunshine, give you my best*

The lyrics can be located within Peace song employing the use of “would” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 12**

*Cross your heart, won't tell no other*

The lyrics can be located within Seven song employing the use of “will” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 13**

*Then you won't have to cry*

The lyrics can be located within Seven song employing the use of “will” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 14**

*Our love will be passed on*

The lyrics can be located within Seven song employing the use of “will” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 15**

*Cross my heart, won't tell no other*

The lyrics can be located within Seven song employing the use of “will” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

**Data 16**

*We ll move to India forever*

The lyrics can be located within Seven song employing the use of “will” modal verb. Within the lyrics, there is a repetition of the lyrics, occurring once.

Based on the result presented above, the researcher found three types of modality in 5 selected songs by Taylor Swift. In August song contained 1 epistemic modality in the form of probability was identified, along with 4 dynamic modality in the form of 3 abilities and 1 volition. In Cardigan song contained 4 epistemic modality in the form of probability were identified, along with 3 dynamic modality in the form of volition. In Mad Woman song contained 1 deontic modality in the form of obligation was identified, along with 3 dynamic

modality in the form of volition. In Peace song contained 1 epistemic modality in the form of probability was identified, along with 5 dynamic modalities in the form 1 ability and 4 volitions. Lastly, in Seven song contained 1 epistemic modality in the form of necessity was identified, along with 1 deontic modality in the form of obligation and 7 dynamic modalities in the form 2 abilities and 5 volitions.

### ***Semantic Meaning of Modality Found in the Lyrics of Taylor Swift's Songs***

The researcher found in five selected Taylor Swift's songs on Folklore album, namely; August, Cardigan, Mad Woman, Peace and Seven have a different semantic meaning of modality for each song. Semantics in the context of modality is concerned with how the meaning of a modality is communicated through the usage of that modality in a sentence and how the presence of that modality affects the meaning of the entire sentence.

In August song, there are some semantic meanings of modality, including: the speaker's ability to reflect on past memories with a sense of admiration, the ability or proficiency to imagine or envision oneself within a romantic scenario, the speaker's ability to inscribe her name on the back of the individual she is speaking to, the desire for someone to give her a call upon their return to school, the speaker think the probability that the chances of receiving a call from that person are significant to the extent that she may need to cancel her appointment.

In Cardigan song, there are some semantic meanings of modality, including: speaker had a feeling or belief in the past that the person in question would leave her with a lasting memory similar to a tattoo kiss, the speaker acknowledges an uncertainty or a probability that is not definitive, the speaker believes there is a strong probability that the scent of smoke will endure for an extended period, the speaker desire a wish or intent to utter a curse directed at someone (you), and this desire predates my awareness of it, strong probability likelihood that someone will experience a sense of longing for that person once the joy or pleasure they once shared diminishes or fades away, probability or very likely that the person will be positioned beneath the front axle light of the speaker's residence, and the speaker's desire is to have confidence that her adversary will eventually come back to her.

In Mad Woman song, there are some semantic meanings of modality, including: the speaker inquires about the listener's expectation regarding the response the speaker will provide to something that has been stated, the speaker has desire to emulate the actions of "they" who

are attempting to achieve the same goal as the speaker. the desire to deliberately irritate or provoke someone until they become upset or angry, Obligation or demand that someone must or ought to feel anger, Perhaps because of something someone else did or a specific circumstance that made them angry and motivated them to be harsh or rude like a speaker.

In Peace song, there are some semantic meanings of modality, including: speaker is unable to bring the person she is speaking to any tranquility, the speaker has desire to do anything to keep the other person's heart warm and safe, speaker has desire to do everything it takes to save the person being discussed, speaker wants to investigate the probability that they could be unable to bring their interlocutor happiness or tranquility, speaker has desire to take significant risks alongside her adversary (swing for the fences), and the speaker desire to provide the subject of her speech the best.

And in Seven song, there are some semantic meanings of modality, including: the speaker expresses a desire to have the listener promise not to divulge what the speaker is about to say, the speaker lacks the ability to recall the face of the person being discussed, there is a necessity to draw a highly probable conclusion based on previously presented facts, the speaker places an obligation or request on the listener to come and reside with them, the speaker believes that she and others (referred to as "we") possess the ability to engage in pirate activities or take actions related to piracy, speaker's desire to avoid a scenario where the person being addressed is in tears, speaker desire for their love to endure and add vibrancy to people's lives in the future, speaker desire not to share the secret with others, speaker expresses a desire or commitment to relocate to India with the individual they are addressing.

As can be observed, there are three types of modality in the five Taylor Swift songs: epistemic modality, deontic modality, and dynamic modality. This can be shown by looking at the analyze that researcher used as primary instrument and intrarater. The result corresponds with Palmer's (2001) theory that there are three various types of modality: epistemic, deontic and dynamic modality. All of the types modality employed in five selected Taylor Swift's songs. The results of this research is comparable to research conducted by Nugraha Deden Novan Setiawan and Reyta Fitriani (2019), who employed an approach that claimed there were three types of modality, however the results showed just two types of modality; episemic modality and deontic modality.

Furthermore, in general, the semantic meaning of modality of each song has a different meaning. In August song signifies a wish to sustain a relationship while acknowledging the transient nature of love. In Cardigan song conveys the aspiration to reconcile and come to terms with reality. In Mad Woman song express anger, discontentment, and the rejection of societal norms that confine women to stereotypes. In Peace song represents the aspiration to find tranquility in love despite uncertainties in the relationship. And the last, in Seven song reflects the longing to revisit an unattainable past and construct an alternate world in one's imagination.

It can be concluded that all these results are only the objective view of researcher based on the theory used. Although this research has deficiency, the results of this research may be difficult to generalize to the wider population. The modality analysis in Taylor Swift's lyrics may reflect only the works of one singer and may not represent in general the way modality is used in other contexts. The results obtained by the researcher was not much because of the limitation of the research, that is the researcher only focused on five selected songs Taylor Swift.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion from the previous section, it can be concluded there are 31 modalities in five selected Taylor Swift's songs on Folklore album: August, Cardigan, Mad Woman, Peace, and Seven. Epistemic modality; necessity (1), and probability (6). Deontic modality; obligation (2). Dynamic modality; ability (6) and volition (16). The dynamic modality, specifically volition is the most dominant type in the five songs. Volition consistently mentioned in five songs. Probability and ability are mentioned in three songs, whereas obligation is mentioned in two songs. Lastly, necessity is mentioned in only one song. There are three types, namely possibility, permission and commissive not mentioned in the five songs. Moreover, the semantic meaning of modality in this research relies on the theme of each song. In August song signifies a wish to sustain a relationship while acknowledging the transient nature of love. In Cardigan song conveys the aspiration to reconcile and come to terms with reality. In Mad Woman song express anger, discontentment, and the rejection of societal norms that confine women to stereotypes. In Peace song represents the aspiration to find tranquility in love despite uncertainties in the relationship. And the last, in Seven song reflects the longing to revisit an unattainable past and construct an alternate world in one's imagination.

According to the results of this research, in the realm of education, it will aid students in enhancing their critical thinking abilities and acquiring a deeper grasp of how to employ modality and its role in the English language. To effectively identify and interpret the utilization of modality within a given text, individuals learning English or a foreign language must possess a comprehensive understanding of modality. Proficiency in modality understanding enables effective communication that aligns with the intended context. Furthermore, this research can be a limitation because research results may not be directly applied to different contexts. The researcher proposes that future researchers conduct this research on a wider variety for people who are interested in conducting more research on this subject. Future researchers may analyze different types of modalities using theory and other data sources.

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